

Redeeming Inter-Gender Relationships

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Our modern era is host to a severe attack on the uniqueness of being male and female for the sake of achieving both gender equality and independence. In the midst of our culture's agenda, the Christian church faces the task of reflecting on God's intended purposes of gender distinction and godly inter-gender relationships.

Uniqueness in gender conveys something special and particular in the life of the family, the Church, and society at large. Upholding gender distinctions by no means implies the end of respectful inter-gender relationships. On the contrary, gender distinction based on Judeo-Christian truth provides a creative incentive for meaningful inter-gender relationships. Much discussion in past years has been devoted to the issue of the specific functions of the sexes in various spheres, yet relatively little discussion has gone into the underlying motives and attitudes which shape inter-gender relationships. In addressing these issues, we must focus on the task of redeeming inter-gender relationships based on Biblical truth.

Of utmost importance is recognizing that God's grace is foundational for godly inter-gender relationships. Our utter need for grace uncovers who we really are. Let us take a closer look at what grace means. Grace confronts us with a most severe divine diagnosis: we find ourselves alienated from the living God to such a degree that we cannot return to God on our own volition and strength. We must acknowledge that we are essentially and fundamentally "recipients" of God's grace, and not "activists". What we deserved (i.e. damnation) we did not get; what we did not deserve (reconciliation with God), we received.

Grace means God has provided a highly cherished substitute to be sacrificed in our stead. This makes grace very dear indeed and exceedingly valuable. Grace implies that we are now the property of God. Our hidden and open agendas cannot be dictated anymore by our pain, experiences, convictions, or by the culture of society, including the respective "cultures" in Christian denominations. Rather, we want to see and understand the design and agenda of God, which is trans-cultural and trans-denominational.

God's grace challenges us to return frequently and willingly to forgiveness as the fundamental fountain of renewal. As recipient of God's forgiveness, we are enabled to forgive. This radical shift constantly redirects our human interactions from being a "victim" to being a "reconciler," from "victimizing" to seeking forgiveness.

God's grace then motivates our growth towards godly inter-gender relationships in our daily lives. It motivates us in our inner being towards a proper response as we speak and act in moral, ethical, and conceptual areas of our lives. God's grace and unmerited devotion to us incites us to godly action. We are liberated to conform to God's order in inter-gender relationships, however that may look.

The agenda of God moves concentrically outward from reconciliation between ourselves and God, to reconciliation with individual people, to reconciliation in the church as a sign to the wider culture and then finally, to being a reconciling element in society (working against societal ills such as unjust labor contracts, violation of human rights, etc.).

Grace thus opens a “facilitative growth-process.” This is a process of laying aside our biases and preconceived ideas, and engaging in (re)learning how God intended men and women to interact with each other as a testimony to the Godhead. This growth-process affects our habits, our unconsciously learned patterns, and our fixed conceptions that are not in accordance with God’s design. The desire for godliness means not only that we would have a pure heart and mind before God, but that we would seek to have godly habits in inter-gender relationships (in marriage, with people in the church, and the work place). The grace of God does not stop anywhere. It is utterly pervasive. It lays claim to all hidden and known areas of life and challenges us to refrain from “doing our own thing” (antinomianism) and from “cranking things out for God” (legalism). It blazes its path right between these two extremes and keeps us in a state of facilitative growth.

Given this foundation of God’s grace, we observe that the chief purpose of inter-gender relationships is to reflect personal and relational characteristics of the Triune Godhead (cf. e.g. 1 Cor. 3:1ff). Scripture conveys gender specific remarks for the ultimate purpose that men and women reflect the Godhead (cf. e.g. Eph. 5:21ff).

Deeply rooted forces that are opposed to the power of God’s grace discourage us and tell us to remain in the pitiful status quo. It is important to address some of these personal and cultural obstructions to God’s purposes.

One obstruction we must deal with is an all too frequent attitude of pride: we dismiss the opposite sex as inferior. God challenges us to lay aside all dismissive attitudes of thought, feeling, and action. In our culture, subtle and open expressions of feminism and male chauvinism are widespread. I have been in some groups, where as a male I am met with utter disdain. A complete separation and independence from males is demanded and lived out consistently. Men are, at the best, semen providers. Any form of mutual dependency and complementarian relationship is abhorred as abusive. On the other end of the spectrum we find heartless male chauvinism where an empty, unwarranted, and shallow sense of superiority is persistent with an utter lack of awareness that we are created in part to reflect the Godhead through inter-gender relationships and thus to glorify him. We must therefore guard against culturally dictated gender-segregation.

A second obstruction is self-abasement. This can be described as an innate and learned sense of inferiority, or living with a lack of confidence and natural assertiveness. This counter-force to the intent of God’s grace in inter-gender relationships includes both self-inflicted intimidation and the willingness to be intimidated by society (external intimidation). We may be so overwhelmed with our own inadequacy and inability to do anything in our personal or public life that we just recoil from relationships. It may be an innate or learned sense of inferiority - a lack of natural assertiveness and confidence.

This external or internal intimidation factor can rob marriages, the church, and general society of our God-given potential. Our environment may appear to confirm our own negative dispositions and cause us to believe that we are not able to contribute anything. If we are then close to a self-assertive male or female, we may automatically withdraw and refuse to pursue healthy inter-gender relationships.

In the final analysis, self-abasement is a form of pride when confronted with God’s grace. It may sound like I am putting salt on a wound and I must be careful at this point. But you see, if God says, “You are so valuable that I am giving My cherished best (His Son) for a reconciled relationship with Me,” who am I to say, “I don’t believe

You. That cannot be true for me?” In the end, pride and self-abasement are two sides of the same coin. Both assert in their own way: “I am in charge. I set the agenda.” This must be considered with caution because self-abasement is often the result of abuse or neglect. Nevertheless, we need to come to a point of humility and say, “God, I feel useless. I feel intimidated. I feel I have nothing to contribute. But if You say so, I shall. I shall, because You take me and give me a place of significance and importance.”

A third obstruction is involvement in inter-gender discrimination at work, in the church, and in the family. Personal and cultural constraints reinforce discrimination and help to stifle the power of God’s grace in our lives. We have to be aware of what is going on in a society which often opposes Judeo-Christian truths and values. For instance, many women are still not paid the same as men in similar or equal jobs. We live in a society that is much more interested in gaining its own power and pursuing its own agenda than in pursuing God’s purposes.

Churches are responsible to create God-intended work opportunities for men and women alike, while upholding a complementarian Biblical framework. Susan Hunt gives a wonderful testimony in her foreword to *Spiritual Mothering* (p. xi): “I am grateful to the senior pastor... and the elders of my church, for providing a context where the gifts and relationships of women flourish.” We should be able to say this of every Christian church. We need to see what is Biblical and identify vocational positions for women in churches.

In the spheres of friendship and marriage attitudes toward members of the opposite sex must be marked by high respect, real appreciation, sacrificial love, and personal support. No discussion on the function of men and women will eradicate unhealthy and ungodly patterns and attitudes in inter-gender relationships.

A fourth counter-force to the redemption of inter-gender relationships is the sexualization of women (and men), particularly in the media. We need to engage in much reflecting and teaching on who women and men really are. They are certainly not sexual objects. Rather, they are spiritual, emotional, and physical individuals and image bearers of God. Men especially need to recapture this fact and then proceed to relate to women as whole beings. We must be aware of the fact that the cultural counter-offensive is extremely persistent and utterly devastating.

We must also mention individualism and autonomous isolation as major obstacles to God’s grace expressing itself in inter-gender relationships. Against the background of much pain, disappointment, and inter-gender abuse, it is temptingly sweet to be self-sufficient, self-comforted, and to be unwilling to cross gender barriers. You may have been hurt, taken for granted, and misrepresented endless times, and so feel justified in withdrawing. God’s grace, however, draws you to actively pursue healthy inter-gender relationships. Churches need to focus on being havens for finding and rediscovering godly same gender and inter-gender relationships.

We must be honest and open about our personal involvement in some or all of these obstructions. Expose and confess personal and cultural pride, hang-ups, fears, angers, anxieties, wounds, biases, longings, aspirations, and perspectives. Avoid generalizing negative experiences with one man or with one woman (be it fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, or wives). The pain and the frustration experienced with a particular man or woman, mixed with centuries-old gender tensions, is powerful indeed. But no real progress can be made until these underlying motives are exposed and dealt with in the light of God’s love and forgiveness. Attitudes of this magnitude and pervasiveness are a formidable, yet often unseen part of the iceberg. These attitudes have to be dealt with long before gender-specific functions and roles in family, church and society can be addressed properly. How can we really expect to make progress in the area of men and women’s functions if underlying attitudes opposed to God’s purposes are not being dealt with openly and honestly?

Let me encourage you on the basis of God’s grace and purposes to grow on the side of God’s love and righteousness. We must live in dynamic hope because God’s grace is extended to us. I see two major objectives as we pur-

sue godly inter-gender relationships in the midst of our modern inter-gender crises. First, to contribute to inter-gender relationships with or without recognition. Let the grace of God drive you to move forward whether you are recognized or not. In this, take a two-pronged approach. Take up the challenge of honing your skills and express them regardless of recognition or remuneration. Let grace drive you to bring to the table what you have to offer to inter-gender relationships, regardless of the circumstances. God sees. Enjoy the gentle sweetness of secrecy. I recently spoke with a student attending Covenant Theological Seminary who said: “To be discriminated against as an African-American person was always an incentive for me to strive for excellence. Excellence is not a ‘white’ thing. I will continue to pursue excellence.” Likewise, in the inter-gender struggle, you may have to work doubly hard to get somewhere. Pursue what you know in the grace of God: lay all your biases on the table and then hone and develop the gifts God has given you.

On the other hand, work actively and persistently towards recognized and fairly remunerated opportunities. In this we need to collaborate with each other in order to open work-opportunities for women.

The second objective is to actively pursue male-female interdependence within a Biblical complementarian view in family, church, and society. We must pursue interdependence in order to oppose male chauvinism and various forms of feminism. Male-female interdependence exposes to shame any hidden or blatant opposition to God’s purposes. We know that both male chauvinism and feminism are aberrations from the creation and redemption design of God. So we need to be pioneers. Pursuing male-female interdependence avoids the “us vs. them” mentality.

Pursue interdependence in order to demonstrate both value and gift-equality as well as functional distinctions, thus reflecting the Trinitarian Godhead (1 Cor 11:1-3). There is both equality and differentiation within the Godhead, and we need to reflect the Godhead in how we express inter-gender relationships in our marriages, in our families, in our churches, and in society at large. Therein lies the richness of uniqueness and particularity. To make progress based on grace implies much inter-gender struggle. When we obey the Gospel’s call to break through barriers, we are asking for trouble since it is always easier to segregate than to congregate. But we are called under grace to transcend personal and cultural barriers in order to congregate under God. The goal for male and female disciples of Christ is to be a viable sign and demonstration to the world of the richness of the Triune God. This is what we need to work towards – not to get our rights. We are trying to reflect the living God in His creation. Let us work to express true inter-gender equality and dignity, and true male-female interdependence, while seeking gender differentiation in a complementarian framework to the glory of God.

¹Tests have been conducted, for instance, on classes with only female high school students. These students clearly yielded better results in learning and performance because a certain external intimidation factor (in this case male classmates) was absent.

This article is based on a lecture given on February 24, 2000. The lecture style has mostly been retained. While some of the points may only be applicable to men or to women respectively, many of the issues raised apply equally to both genders. Hans Bayer would like to thank Ms. Mary Bolin for her competent and selfless help in producing this article.

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